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SUBJECT: Second round of GSL-LTTE talks slated to kick off October 31; Technical issues will be main focus

Refs: (A) State 214611 (Notal)

- (B) Oslo 2479 (Notal)
- (C) Colombo 2003, and previous
- (D) Bangkok 6663, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers are scheduled to kick off their second round of talks on October 31 in Thailand. The Norwegian-facilitated talks are slated to focus mainly on technical issues, including the modalities of forming a task force on humanitarian issues and a committee on easing the burden of GSL military zones. Keeping with the agenda of process oriented discussions, fireworks are not expected. The fact that the talks are taking place on schedule and apparently in a positive atmosphere is good news for the peace process. END SUMMARY.

Second Round of Talks in Thailand

2. (SBU) The Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are scheduled to hold their second round of talks from October 31 - November 3. The Norwegian government is facilitating the talks. As with the first round of talks, which took place September 16-18 (See Refs C-D), the venue for the second round will be Thailand. The meeting site has changed, however, with the second round taking place in a hotel just outside of Bangkok. (Note: The first round took place at Sattahip Naval Base near Pattaya. Per Ref B, the venue for the third round of talks scheduled to take place December 2-5 has been shifted to Norway.)

3. (C) There have been changes to both sides' delegations. Still led by veteran LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham, the LTTE delegation now also includes political chief S.P. Thamilchelvam and eastern military commander V. Karuna. (Note: Ref C contains bio-data on these two LTTE officials.) In addition to Ministers Peiris and Moragoda, the government side now also includes Major Gen. Shantha Kottegoda, the Sri Lankan Army's Chief of the General Staff. Despite serious infighting in his party over the peace process (See Ref C), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem is also expected to participate in the talks as a member of the government team. (Note: There are late reports that Hakeem has delayed his departure for Bangkok because of the ongoing problems in his party.)

Focus is Mainly on Technical Issues

4. (C) As previewed in Reftels, the second round of talks is slated to focus mainly on the following technical issues:

-- Joint Task Force (JTF): The two sides are expected to spend a significant chunk of time deciding on the exact "terms of reference" for the JTF. Issues that need to be resolved include exactly what role the JTF will have with respect to the delivery of humanitarian and developmental assistance to the north and east (as well as to other parts of the country). In an October 29 meeting with the Ambassador and DCM before leaving for Thailand, Minister for Economic Reform Milinda Moragoda said the government wanted the JTF to focus on setting "priorities" for assistance, as opposed to being an implementing body. In reference to the JTF and its responsibilities, humanitarian mine action is reportedly at the top of the agenda for the talks, as is the issue of how to structure assistance to the Muslim community in the east. GSL-LTTE representation on the JTF also has to be agreed on. Moragoda said he wanted Bernard Goonetilleke, the head of the GSL Peace

Secretariat and Ambassador to China, to head up the

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government side. Goonetilleke's selection was not finally settled, however. For its part, the LTTE has already named V. Balakumaran, a high-ranking Tiger official, as its principal representative to the JTF. (Note: Ref C contains bio-data on Balakumaran.)

-- Joint Committee on "High Security Zones": The two sides are also expected to agree on the modalities of forming this committee, which will be focused on finding ways to ease the burden on the local populace of the GSL's "high security zones" in the north and east. (Note: The "high security zones" in question are large-scale GSL military positions set up in the north and east for defense in depth against possible LTTE attack. Through the formation of these positions over the years, local Tamils lost use of prime agricultural and other land.) One key issue expected to be discussed re this committee are ways to ease the return of displaced persons to their points of origin. (Note: There has been a recent spurt in returns, with over 200,000 people, most of them Tamils, returning to the north and east since the advent of the peace process.) Moragoda told us that he expected that the GSL would name Defense Secretary Austin Fernando to head up its representation

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on this committee.

-- Donor Conferences: The two sides were also expected to discuss the late November donor conference in Oslo and the conference planned for next year in Japan.

-- Agendas for Future Rounds: According to GSL contacts (also see Ref B), the two sides will also discuss the agenda for the planned third round of talks in early December and that of the fourth round scheduled to take place January 6-9, 2003.

-- Other Issues: Moragoda also said his colleague G.L. Peiris planned to discuss some human rights-related issues with the LTTE. (Note: Moragoda was not clear what these issues might be, but we guess that they have something to do with the Prevention of Terrorism Act -- "PTA." The LTTE and other Tamils have been demanding that those held under this act be released from detention as soon as possible. In response, the government has publicly committed itself to releasing as many PTA detainees as it can.)

No Fireworks Expected

15. (C) Keeping with the agenda of process oriented discussions, fireworks are not expected. Norwegian Ambassador Westborg told us that he did not expect the second round to lead to the sort of dramatic announcement made by LTTE senior negotiator Anton Balasingham at the end of the first round. (Note: At the press conference at the close of the first round, Balasingham edged away from the LTTE's long-standing demand for a separate "Tamil Eelam" entity. This announcement received widespread publicity.) That said, Moragoda told us that the second round of talks would not be wholly technical in nature. He noted that "core" issues of sovereignty were entwined in discussing the formation of the JTF, e.g., the GSL wanted the JTF to be a quasi-governmental body, whereas the LTTE wanted it to be an independent body separate from the Sri Lankan government.

COMMENT

16. (C) Amid the endemic cohabitation stresses and the recent widening of fissures in the governing coalition, the fact that the talks are taking place on schedule and apparently in a positive atmosphere is good news for the peace process. It also works into the government's "sloppy solution" strategy of trying to ensnare the Tigers into a process of ever-increasing confidence building on discrete "quality of life" issues, e.g., the opening of roads, humanitarian issues, fishing rights, etc. In concentrating on these issues in the early stages of the talks, the GSL would prefer not to grapple with the controversial "final status" issues involved in the Tigers' demands. Given calls by the president for further definition of its long-term plans (see Ref C), the government cannot avoid these larger, more conceptual issues forever, but it still has some space now. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS